

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHY OF CONTEMPORARY IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

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Abstract

This research work is aimed at investigating the effects of apprenticeship and social capital on new business creation process of Igbo entrepreneurs in Nigeria. The high success rate of apprentice turned entrepreneurs and increasing attachment of these entrepreneurs to their ethnic based union were the reasons that gave rise to the study. Findings revealed that while apprenticeship had significant effects on pre-founding activities when the business was taking off, social capital became important when the business had been established. Apprenticeship is designed to simultaneously train novices in specific craft or trade skills while socializing them to join the social and cultural elite represented by master craftsmen. Using a method of critical analysis, the researcher noticed that apprenticeship had significant effects on business idea generation, idea modification, business location and financing while social capital served as source of insurance services and access to information. Therefore, the researchers recommends that apprenticeship practice should be revived and modernized and also, that ethnic based unions should be given legal recognition and restructured to play both social and economic roles.

Keywords: Igbo, Apprenticeship, *Nwaboyi*, *Igba boy*, *Imu ahia*.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, people have transferred skills from one generation to another in form of apprenticeship. In Nigeria and all over Africa, apprenticeship has been an age long

method of training young people in trade and craft, agriculture, business and catering. When youths in olden days achieved the status of skilled worker; they become important members of the society. In Igboland, apprenticeship system was an institution that was generally guarded by customs, lineage and rituals. Every male born into a family was expected to learn his matrilineal craft, and it was easy to identify a young male child as a member of lineage found to be proficient in the lineage craft. The apprenticeship system was brought to the limelight in Nigeria after the Nigerian-Biafran war. Many parents who were left with nothing after the war were forced to send their children (8- 20 years) to survive as traders. This was how Igbo settlers after the war rebuilt Onitsha, Nnewi, Aba and most parts of Lagos. In the apprenticeship system, the 'Oga' (master) and 'Nwaboyi' (Apprentice) are in agreement for a period ranging from 4-7 years whereby the apprentice is to serve and learn from the 'Oga'. Usually, the mode of settlement is contained in the agreement.

Apprenticeship as a method of establishing young people, and training the unskilled, has been very beneficial to the Igbo. Many people achieved excellence in their vocations because their *Oga* trained and settled them well. Many notable business moguls in Onitsha attribute their success to what they learnt as apprentice. Admittedly, apprenticeship offers the *Nwaboyi* the opportunity to acquire business acumen, work attitude, how to deal with suppliers and customers, and interaction with other practitioners. It provides contacts/networks and lessens the burden on the *Nwaboyi's* parents. In addition, it has helped youths from indigent homes to achieve excellence in what they do. The increasing number of Igbo entrepreneurs in several states and increasing number of people that start new ventures within few years of staying in there, coupled with increase in the number of ethnic based networks and higher success rate of

entrepreneurs who started as apprentices, led the researcher into querying how these entrepreneurs develop businesses outside their region especially with the aid of social and human capital. To date, there is a limited number of studies on immigrant entrepreneurship and use of social/human capital. Most of the studies focus on features of immigrant entrepreneurs (Peter De Vries, 2007), but little or no study has been conducted on how entrepreneurs from different backgrounds within a country use apprenticeship and social capital in overcoming these entry barriers and in creating new business ventures.

Concept of Apprenticeship System

Apprenticeship is an art, trade, or craft under a legal agreement that defines the duration and conditions of the relationship between master and the learner. For the purpose of this paper, apprenticeship may be considered as a system of learning whereby an individual learns a professional skill in a practical way through a structured programme of on-the-job training. It usually involves acquiring knowledge, mechanical skills and the development of an attitude or discipline for a particular job. Craig and Bittel (1967) citing Akande, opined that apprenticeship is a combination of on-the-job training and related technical instruction in which workers learn the practical and theoretical aspects of a skilled occupation, craft or trade (P.1).

According to Anyanwu (1981) citing Akande, apprenticeship may also take the form of helping new employees to relate their previous education to the requirement of their new job (P.1). Apprenticeship also incorporates a system of guidance and counseling as most apprentices are required to live with their masters so as to acquire the necessary attitude, diplomacy and decorum required for the job. It is the combination of these

depositions that make graduates of apprenticeship training entrepreneurs instead of job seekers. Curriculum, on the other hand, may be operationally defined as the programme of training through which learners pass to an intended goal. This means that all the activities done by the apprentice or experiences acquired by him in or outside the workshop under the guidance of his master constitute his training programme and thus his curriculum.

Apprenticeship Training

Apprenticeship is a form of vocational training. Aghenta, (1992) citing Akande noted that: Vocational education emphasizes the preparation and participation in occupations of social value designed to develop skills, abilities, understanding, attitudes, work habits and appreciation encompassing knowledge and information needed by workers to enter and make progress in employment on a useful and productive basis(P.2). Ogunowo (1991) citing Akande, opined that apprenticeship has a definite advantage over the formal vocational training as long as there is good correlation between job requirements and on-the-job training. I argued further that: On-the-job training under an apprenticeship scheme is likely to produce much more highly qualified workforce, due to its close relationship with the production process and greater competence of the instructors. Moreover, there is the added advantage that industries tend to bear the cost of training which constitute a financial burden on the master (p.2).

According to Bequel and Meyers (1995) citing Akande, apprenticeship system of training keeps away youths from the abusive and exploitative conditions of child labour. They argued that: If it is assumed that certain children are going to work, perhaps out of economic necessity, no matter the attempts that are made to discourage them, then one way to

keep them out of work that is hazardous is to provide them with employment that is safe by offering them vocational and other training to help prepare the participating children in life skills (p.2). In some cases, there is the risk that apprenticeship in some workshops may degenerate into child labour. Consequently, master craftspeople need to be aware of child labour laws to ensure appropriate treatment. Their role must be that of in-loco-parentis especially critical in the protection of their learners who have initially no negotiating power in the labour market, and are therefore vulnerable. Because of this and the peculiar economic situation in Nigeria which has made parents to turn their children into street hawkers or household helps in a bid to augment the family income, this paper posits that for apprenticeship to really develop and fill the need for skilled manpower and entrepreneurs, the minimum age for admission into apprenticeship should not be less than the age of completion of compulsory secondary schooling, which in Nigeria is not less than fifteen years.

It is popularly said that one of the most traditional and best known measures for promoting education at the same time as vocational skills is the apprenticeship system. But in Nigeria, it's a considerable potential for educating and training large numbers of poor children while offering them work in safe condition has rarely been explored. Government can play an effective role in promoting this system through organizing a sort of formal training for apprenticeship and by setting out the conditions under which apprenticeship may be engaged.

Bequel (1991); citing Akande viewed thus: Child labour cannot be abolished so long as poverty persists. The best that can be done is perhaps to legitimize child employment and to ensure that child workers are provided with legal protection and adequate training through the apprenticeship system (P.3).

The relationship between master and learner in Nigeria is based on a contractual agreement between the parent/guardian of the child and the master of the workshop or trade. This agreement in its general terms stipulates that the parents give out his child to be trained in a specified trade by the master craftsman for a specific period of time until the child acquires the necessary skill to set up on his own. For this period of training, the parents may or may not make a financial deposit. It is however understood by both parties that the apprentice would live with the master who shall care for him. However, the apprentice on his own must help with the domestic chores. Furthermore, the contribution of the apprentice in the workshop or trade shall not earn any wage. It is more of a father-son relationship than the formal teacher - pupil relationship of the school. It is on the premise of the above that the apprentice training scheme of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) failed. The Federal Government as a result of the uproar against unemployment and the persistent call for a definite policy of action, instituted the apprentice training scheme, and in doing so flouted the age old principles, norms and values of the apprenticeship tradition.

For instance, the relationship between the master and apprentice became formalized; the apprentice had to come to work from his home, following the government approved working hours, the apprentice draw a wage directly from Government whether or not he had learnt anything, consequently, the master had no direct control over the apprentice. The result is truancy of the apprentice and finally failure of the scheme. This paper is however of the opinion that the ease with which Government abandoned the scheme is an admission of improper planning and vision, a lack of commitment, and a poor desire to face challenges. The apprentice scheme can be resuscitated, its principles, norms and values respected, then built and strengthened into a

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veritable scheme for national development. One way of doing this is to incorporate the apprentice training scheme into the formal school system.

Types of Apprenticeship and Approaches to good Apprenticeship System

Apprenticeship has witnessed a lot of changes, and these changes led to the categorization of apprenticeship. According to Haan (2008), there are three types of apprenticeship training; thus, the traditional apprenticeship; informal apprenticeship and the modern apprenticeship. To Haan, the traditional apprenticeship refers to the well-organized transfer of skills within families and social groups based on socio-cultural conventions. It is an agreement between the master craftsman and the parents or guardian of the apprentice regulating skill training. The master craftsman takes care of lodging and food for the apprentice and is expected to also provide some moral upbringing.

The Traditional Apprenticeship- In the informal sector according to Ekpenyong (2011) is subject to social changes. These changes can be observed in time; in different localities; in different trade-sectors; within a specific trade sector and in the type of skills acquired through apprenticeship. Apprenticeships are as good as the master craftspeople, although apprentices are sometimes better educated. However, master craftspeople are the cornerstone of apprenticeship to encourage excellence, and enhance productivity and quality of products or services. The apprenticeships here are not demand-oriented; sometimes they are poor in identifying market needs.

The Informal Apprenticeship- This is similar to the traditional apprenticeship but more “open” in the sense that majority of apprentices come from outside the family. Informal apprenticeship training according to Haan (2008) is common

in the more “modern” informal activities such as car repair, welding, hairdressing e.t.c. Recently, one can observe examples of master craftspeople that shifted their focus from productive activities to training as their main activity. In his own perspective, Ekpenyong (2011), said that in this type of apprenticeship, children unconsciously acquire relevant skills from their parents, while observation and direct telling by the parents were common features of learning; questioning seems to have been a more effective method of ensuring learning.

The Major weakness that was noticed in this type of apprenticeship training according to ILO (2012) is that it consists of long working hours, unsafe working conditions, low or no allowances or wages, little or no social protection in the case of illness or accident and strong gender imbalances. It can become exploitative if a master craftspeople breaches the training. Agreement in failing to impart their skills adequately, thus keeping apprentice depending on him (master) too long. This led to the regulated apprenticeship.

The Modern Apprenticeship: Haan (2008), said that this type of apprenticeship is usually regulated by an “Apprenticeship Act” which stipulates the length of the training period, the training format, the number of working/training hours, the payment of (part of) minimum wage, and so forth. In most developing countries there are only a small number of modern apprenticeships which are mainly concentrated in medium and large enterprises and state enterprises. According to ILO (2012), it is structured and regulated, usually by legislation at national level; it is waged, based on the workplace, and also based on a contract which specifies duration, programme of learning (including transferable skills) assessment and final certification and the entitlement to off-the-job learning. More so, that the major characteristic is its “Dual system” which refers to the fact that planned learning takes place in two locations; in the employer’s premises and in the vocational

school. The major aim is to enhance general education and to develop technical knowledge and skills to internationally competitive standards. It again requires high levels of trust and cooperative behaviour between public authorities, employers and the young person.

Igbo Apprenticeship System in Nigeria

The beginning of the Igbo business learning culture is the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System (ITAS). The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System is a kind of informal and unstructured training programme, scheduled for an agreed period of time, which a person undergoes in order to acquire a desirable aspect of entrepreneurship skill. Igbo is the most capable of teaching the world trade education through the development and automation of this ITAS (Dibia, 2013). The ITAS is a vibrant part of the Igbo business attributes that has for long been shaping their mental and intelligent quotient about business success. The Igbo Apprenticeship System is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that allow people learn business from a master for a certain number of years (5-8) depending and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, get cash infusion and support to start their own business. There is no salary paid during the time of the apprenticeship tenure but meals, clothing and fare are provided for by the master. When the years of learning are over, the boy is as good as his master. According to Robert (2015), the Igbo apprenticeship system is the largest in the world because when an apprentice serves, his master is expected to set him up in business incubator platform. The journalist further added that apprenticeships that work like locally generated venture capital and systems for allocating scarce water can propagate and scale these models that could help communities thrive from the bottom up.

In Igbo land, there's a culture that frowns on children roaming the streets doing nothing, so if a child is unable to go to school, his relatives ensure that he learns a trade. Usually in most cases, it's the type of trade that his family people have been involved in. So boys and girls (usually those out of primary school or secondary school) would intern with the owner of the shop who runs either a spare parts, second hand clothing, supermarkets business etc. for a specific period of time (10 years or so) to learn the trade. It is an unpaid apprenticeship but meals, clothing and fare are provided for. When the years are over and the boy is as good as his master, the master establishes him with some cash and goods to start his own business. Sometimes, in order to prevent the apprentice graduate from squandering all that capital at once, the master tells him at the end of one year, a certain percentage should be returned. The apprentice graduate also gets his own boys who would learn at his feet and it becomes a continuous process.

Types of Igbo Apprenticeship

Basically, research has it that there are two ways of practicing apprenticeship in Igbo lands; these types are the **Igba-Boy (serving)** and the **Imu-Ahia (learning)** apprenticeship system. Today, *Imu Ahia/Igba Boy* has grown to become a cultural heritage in the Eastern region of Nigeria as it has been passed from generation to generation. The *Imu-Ahia* Igbo Apprenticeship system all started because the Igbo people needed to take back their future which was taken from them. Because they had barely to survive on and limited resources to use, they had to figure out a way of generating revenue at any time. Petty trade was one of the only ways to build back destroyed communities as well as farming, but then, farming required time that was not readily available at that moment.

Basically, most people went into trading. This *Imu-Ahia/Igba Boy* model was simple, it works in such a way that business

owners would take in younger boys who can be relatives, siblings or non-relatives but from the same region, house them and have them work as apprentices in his business and by so doing learn the work and the secrets of the business. After the allotted time for the training was reached, 5-8 years' time, a little graduation ceremony would be held for the *Nwaboyi* (the person that learnt the trade). He would also be paid a lump sum for their services over the years, and the money will be used to start a business for the *Nwaboyi*.

Igbaboyi: This type of Igbo apprenticeship system illustrates the practice of which the learner of a particular trade or craft will have to move in with the master of the trade or craft with an agreement between the master and the learner's parents or guardian. In loco parentis the master takes full responsibility of the learner and on the other hand, the learner is expected to carry out his primary duties in the house as well as in the shop or industry. The master is obligated to settle the learner at the end of the agreed period of time when apprentice graduate is as good as the master.

Imu-ahia: The *imu-ahia* practice of Igbo apprenticeship is a system of apprenticeship that is practice not just in the Eastern Nigeria but also in other parts of the country where apprenticeship is practiced. In this practice of apprenticeship, the learner is not mandated to stay in the same house as the master. Thus, such learner is to pay a specified amount of money which serves as a payment for the skills he is to acquire within an agreed period of time. In this practice, the learner has a resumption time and takes care of the shop during his working hour. Furthermore, the master does not settle the learner with any goods or cash, rather issues certificate for his

completion of service when the learner is proven to be as good as the master.

Conclusion

This study has succeeded in bringing to the limelight the different roles apprenticeship and social capital play in business development as well as the stages when they are needed. It shows that social capital and apprenticeship are not substitutes as some scholars believed; rather, they are complementary. The study has also show-cased the indispensable role of apprenticeship in entrepreneurship development. Indeed, apprenticeship does not only provide training for the apprentices; it equally provides mentoring services and serves as nursery for any entrepreneurial ambition.

Recommendations

Having discovered the critical role of apprenticeship in new business development, efforts should be made to revive the practice. Admittedly, the system has been abused by those involved in this apprenticeship system but abuse does not remove use. Since the role of ethnic based networks such as Igbo Union has significant effects on business sustainability, they should be given legal recognition and strengthened as platform for capacity building, technology transfer and as disciplinary force to regulate members' behaviour. Finally, ethnic based groups such as Igbo Union in this case should see themselves not only as social groups but also, as economic forces that can own businesses, negotiate business terms on behalf of their members and also provide public goods which members would not find viable to provide individually.

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